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SUBJECT: GENERAL MOEEN CONSOLIDATES POSITION; CARETAKERS  
CLOSE TO DEAL WITH FORMER PRIME MINISTERS

REF: DHAKA 593

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary  
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¶1. (S) Bangladesh Army Chief of Staff General Moeen Uddin Ahmed remains committed to holding elections by the end of ¶2008. That said, he has directed personnel changes that could further consolidate his position within the Army and sideline his principal rival, Lieutenant General Masud Uddin Chowdhury. The Caretaker Government's negotiations with former Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia could lead to their release in the coming days. Doubts remain, however, about the political parties' willingness to publicly agree to continue the reform agenda. Meanwhile, the recent arrests of former BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami Ministers and the ongoing law and order crackdown at lower levels could complicate efforts to reach a political solution to the current impasse. The Ambassador has sent an unambiguous message that there is no alternative to free, fair and credible parliamentary elections by the end of the year. We will need to remain vigilant against attempts to back away from elections while keeping the pressure on all sides to compromise to reach that goal.

Moeen Consolidates his Position with the Army  
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¶2. (S) During a breakfast meeting with the Ambassador June 4, Brigadier A.T.M. Amin, Director for Counter Terrorism in the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, provided some context to the recent decision to move Principal Staff Officer Lieutenant General Masud Uddin Chowdhury to the position of Commandant of the National Defense College. While technically a lateral move, this effectively sidelines Masud, who had come to be seen as Army Chief General Moeen Uddin Ahmed's principal rival. Amin asserted that, along with the move to NDC, Masud was being stripped of his responsibility for overseeing the anti-corruption drive. (NOTE: In a subsequent conversation, however, Masud told us he was for now at least continuing his anti-corruption work. END NOTE.)

¶3. (S) Fiercely loyal to General Moeen and known to have clashed with Masud in the past, Amin questioned some of Masud's decisions related to the anti-corruption drive, including ordering the recent arrest of former Ministers including Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Maulana Motiur Rahman Nizami. Amin acknowledged that there had been divisions within the Army, including some who had questioned General Moeen's decisions related to supporting the move towards elections. Amin implied that this opposition had coalesced around Masud

and that the recent round of senior officer transfers had been designed to move Masud out of his current position.

¶4. (S) The personnel changes also seem to have been taken with an eye towards succession planning within the Army. Amin told the Ambassador that Lieutenant General Abu Tayed Muhammad ((Zahir))ul Alam, who will be posted as High Commissioner to Australia, will remain in the running to succeed Moeen. Amin indicated that Major General Mohammed Abdul ((Mubeen)), who is moving from General Officer Commanding Chittagong (the premier field command position), was a respected U.S. educated and apolitical officer. With his new assignment, Mubeen would likely receive his third star and be in the running to succeed Moeen, whose term expires in June 2009.

#### Negotiations with Former Prime Ministers =====

¶5. (S) Amin also confirmed that negotiations were underway with former Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia. Amin suggested that some type of accommodation with the two former Prime Ministers was inevitable, given their continuing hold over their parties. He said both Hasina and Zia, as well as Zia's younger son, could be granted permission to travel abroad for medical treatment. Amin was adamant, however, that the criminal cases against them would not be

dismissed and held out hope that eventual convictions would undermine the former leaders' popularity. Amin explained there was some room for maneuver since most of the corruption during the Hasina and Zia eras had been committed by others in their entourages and not the two leaders themselves.

¶6. (S) In a discussion the previous evening, Foreign Affairs Adviser Dr. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury confided to the Ambassador that discussions were underway with the two leaders, adding that Hasina could soon be released and allowed to travel to the U.S. or Canada. Amin recalled that the Government had earlier presented both Hasina and Zia with a seven point proposal for their release, including agreement to ratify the actions of the Caretaker Government and continue the reform process.

#### Prospects for Dialogue and Elections =====

¶7. (S) Amin maintained that the political parties had outsmarted the Caretaker Government Advisers by convincing them to accept bilateral talks as the format for the ongoing political dialogue. This allowed those within the parties who did not want to see the dialogue succeed to scuttle the process. Amin held out hope that, with the issue of the two leaders' fate decided, the parties could be coaxed back into the dialogue. Amin suggested that there might be a role for "eminent persons" to act as facilitators or witnesses for the dialogue.

¶8. (S) Amin warned that if the dialogue failed and the parties decided to boycott elections one possible alternative would be for the government to bypass the parties and go to the people directly by holding a referendum on the question of reforms. Another possibility would be to hold parliamentary elections on a non-party basis, as with local elections. The Ambassador unambiguously told Amin that neither of these options would be acceptable and that both would play into the parties' hands. The only way out was to hold free, fair and credible national elections.

¶9. (S) Amin agreed that elections were the best route out of the current crisis. Amin told the Ambassador internal GOB polls indicated the Awami League would gain the largest number of seats in an election, but by itself would not be able to form a government. The GOB analysis saw the BNP, Jatiya Party, and Jamaat-e-Islami also emerging with a significant number of seats to create a rough balance in the new Parliament. Regardless, approximately half of the

elected parliamentarians would be new to the institution,  
given the sidelining of previous MPs.

#### Law and Order Crackdown =====

¶10. (S) When asked about the ongoing wave of arrests, which the police described as a law and order crackdown, Amin said that only about 500 individuals had been detained under the Emergency Power Rules. The remaining 10,000 or so individuals were simply being detained on criminal charges related to outstanding cases and warrants. Amin questioned the wisdom of conducting this arrest drive at this time, noting it had contributed to a sense of fear on the part of many individuals. Amin confided that there had been efforts to scale back the arrest drive, which some in the police had envisioned going much farther. He denied there was a political motive to the arrests, but acknowledged that some of those detained were politicians with criminal histories. (NOTE: A senior police contact told us the criminal arrest wave had been planned to coincide with the political crackdown. END NOTE.)

#### Comment =====

¶11. (S) General Moeen appears to be sincere about holding elections and has demonstrated that he retains control over the institution. Thus, it appears as if the senior Army Leadership and the Caretaker Advisers are moving in the same direction. That said, coordination and communication between the Caretakers and DGFI regarding the talks that both are holding with the ladies appear almost non-existent. Still, a deal with the two former Prime Ministers appears more likely now than ever before. There will remain a need to ensure the continuity of reforms after the elections. We will also need to continue to guard against efforts by all involved to divert from the goal of parliamentary elections. This will include keeping pressure on the parties to commit to continuing reforms and on both sides to compromise.

Moriarty